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Panel to Double-Check Estimates Of Soviet Threat by Spy Agencies

By William Beecher
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Concerned that the intelligence community in recent years may have significantly understated the threat of the Soviet military buildup, a presidential advisory group has commissioned an independent analysis by outside experts.

Well-placed sources say the unusual study was ordered by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board after comparing the approximately 15-page executive summaries of the last two years' national intelligence estimates against voluminous backup material. The summary conclusions often were "softer" than the detailed analysis on which they were based, the sources said.

The annual national intelligence estimate (NIE) is regarded as the single most important document on which the President and other top administration officials base judgments, ranging from how much to spend on strategic missiles and tanks to what sorts of options can be considered without undue risk in a variety of arms control negotiations.

REFERRED TO BY its initials within government, the NIE is the joint product of the whole intelligence community.

The outside study group is headed by Harvard Prof. Richard Pipes, a specialist in Soviet affairs. It is

charged with coming up, by Nov. 7, with a parallel NIE executive summary for 1976, together with its recommendations for ways to minimize institutional bias in the existing analytical process.

Besides Pipes, others reportedly involved in the study include: Paul Nitze, former deputy secretary of defense, Navy secretary and State Department policy planner; Lt. Gen. Daniel Graham, recently retired director of the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency; retired Gen. John Vogt, former commander of the U.S. Air Force in Europe and onetime staff director for the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Prof. William Van Cleave of the University of Southern California, a onetime member of the U.S. SALT delegation; and John Paisley, retired analyst for the CIA.

Also working actively with the group, sources said, is at least one government official, Dr. Paul Wolfowitz of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

WHILE NITZE IS one of Jimmy Carter's advisers on military and foreign affairs, sources insisted that the top-secret study was not politically motivated and would not be available to any but the most senior administration officials. And its due date falls shortly after the presidential election.

They conceded, however, that some of those on the outside study group have been identified in the past with relatively hard-line views on the Soviet threat. For example, Graham, when he headed DIA, long argued that the CIA was grossly understating the cost of the Russian defense program. Earlier this year, the CIA, after extensive analysis, concluded that it had indeed been underestimating that cost — by nearly 100 percent.

Sources familiar with the outside study say that since work began in early September the Pipes group has been given total access to the same raw intelligence and detailed ana-

lyses available to those drawing up this year's official NIE. Additionally, the group has called upon a variety of experts in and out of government to seek their opinions on the implications of key Soviet defense programs.

THE SOURCES SAY the group discovered, for example, that there was no mention of the Soviet civil defense effort in the executive summary for any of the 10 years ending in 1974, even though a multibillion dollar Soviet effort had been under way during that period. A crash study by CIA and DIA is now attempting to analyze the portent of that program.

The group also learned that recent NIEs have estimated there was no way the Soviets could gain strategic superiority over the United States over the next 10 years, regardless of what the United States did in its own defense programs. Such an estimate could have major impact on what programs the United States pursues and with what sense urgency or equanimity.

The Pipes group is believed to be looking at the possibility of suggesting that the staff involved in drawing up the NIE be physically moved out of CIA headquarters and be responsible directly to the President, rather than the CIA director.